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Article Title: "Karl Timmermann: From Pebble Creek to the Rhine"

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Notes: Lt Karl H Timmermann figured prominently in the success of the US Army in capturing the only bridge left intact by the Germans throughout the entire length of the Rhine River. This is the story of this West Point, Nebraska, native.

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Photos: Lt Karl H Timmermann; Arnold Timmermann; Timmermann family home in West Point in 1927; John Henry Timmermann in his WWI uniform; Mary Weisbecker Timmermann with sons Karl and Fritz; Lt Karl Zimmerman and his brother Pvt Fritz Timmermann in Belgium, 1944; post card commemorating the fiftieth crossing of the Rhine at Remagen, the Ludendorff Bridge; Karl Henry Timmermann's grave at the National Cemetery at Fort Logan, Colorado; Timmermann Memorial Field in West Point dedication May 30, 1965

Karl Timmermann: **From Pebble Creek to the Rhine**

By Alex Meyer

On March 7, 1945, "occurred one of those rare and fleeting opportunities which occasionally present themselves in war, and which, if grasped, have incalculable effects in determining future success."¹ So said Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower of the capture by American soldiers of the only bridge left intact by the Germans throughout the entire length of the Rhine River. Figuring prominently in this unexpected military success was Karl Henry Timmermann, a U.S. Army officer from West Point, Nebraska, whose determination and gallantry brought great honor to his country, his state, his hometown, and his family.

"To the Quick and the Brave Belong the Reward" is the inscription on a memorial at the site where the Ludendorff railroad bridge once spanned the Rhine at Remagen, Germany.² The plaque was placed there on March 7, 1985, by German army veterans who, forty years earlier, had attempted to prevent American troops from making their first bridgehead across the river during the closing weeks of World War II in Europe. With the Americans' capture of the Remagen Bridge before it could be destroyed, Germany's last great river barrier in the west had been breached, disrupting the German defenses and damaging their fading morale.

The momentous achievement acknowledged by General Eisenhower and by the German veterans was due, in part, to the efforts of a twenty-two-year-old Nebraska officer, 2d Lt. Karl



Lt. Karl H. Timmermann. Courtesy of Mary Ann Hollman Timmermann

Timmermann. A member of the Twenty-seventh Armored Infantry Battalion of the Ninth Armored Division, Timmermann had been promoted to command of Company A only a day before it spearheaded the capture of the Remagen Bridge.³ Ironically, he had been born near Frankfurt, Germany, a

mere eighty miles away, the son of a German mother and an American soldier in the World War I U.S. Army of Occupation.⁴

As the first American officer across the bridge, Timmermann earned the Distinguished Service Cross and a place in the ranks of his country's most valiant soldiers. His life, however, had tragic overtones, including the return to the land of his birth as a member of an invading army and his untimely death at age twenty-nine. Fifty years after the event that catapulted him to fame, the details of Timmermann's unusual story deserve retelling.

Arnold Timmermann, Karl's grandfather, was the vanguard of the family in America, emigrating from Altmarhorst/Twistringen, Germany, to Monterey Township in Cuming County, Nebraska, in 1871. Ten years later Arnold's parents (John Henry and Helena), his brother (John Henry), and his sister (Anna) followed him to the same Pebble Creek Valley locale north of the village of Dodge.⁵

Arnold and Anna Wortman were married in June 1876 in West Point. Their second son, John Henry (who was always called Henry before moving to West Point), born on July 28, 1884, was to set the stage for his son Karl's unusual odyssey during World War II.⁶

After a sixteen-year attempt at farming in the Pebble Valley north of Snyder in Dodge County, Arnold relocated on another farm near Plainview in Pierce County in 1910. He then moved with his wife and son, Henry, to a white frame house on Pine Street in Snyder about 1912, which would be the Timmermann

Alex Meyer, a native of Snyder, Nebraska, is a teacher in the Dodge, Nebraska, High School.

Karl Timmermann

clan's home for decades. The elder Timmermann ran the "Livery and Feed" business in Snyder for about two years with the aid of son Henry, who also worked as a farmhand in the vicinity.⁷

Henry Timmermann was among the thirty or so men from the Snyder area counted among the 57,500 Nebraskans who entered military service as a result of World War I. Though Henry registered for the draft in June 1917, he was not inducted; he enlisted on April 9, 1919, at Fort Logan, Colorado. From Camp Meade, Maryland, he shipped out for France, arriving at Brest on May 22, then traveled by train to Koblenz, Germany. There he was assigned to Company M of the Eighth Infantry, part of the American Army of Occupation. In early September 1919 Henry was one of about forty men from his unit absent without leave. During this period he met Maria Weisbecker, a German fraulein from Niederad, a Frankfurt suburb. Following their engagement in October 1921, Henry and his bride lived in the Frankfurt vicinity, where their son, Karl, was born June 19, 1922.⁸

Rampant postwar inflation soon made life in Germany impossible for the Timmermanns. Through the efforts of Miss Marion C. Fox, the British Quaker Society paid for the family's passage back to the United States, where they arrived in January 1924 when Karl was about eighteen months old.⁹ By spring 1924 the beleaguered little family had returned to Henry's parents' home on Pine Street in Snyder. There, among the many residents of German descent, the family found respite.

Henry Timmermann did farm work for Carl Schneider and others in the area.¹⁰ Karl began school at Snyder in a building directly across the street from the Timmermann home. In December 1927 the family, now numbering five with the birth of Fritz in 1925 and Mary in March 1927, moved to West Point, where Karl's father became known as "John Henry."

In early July 1928 John Henry decided to resolve his clouded military ca-



Arnold Timmermann. Courtesy of Carol Keller



The Timmermann Family moved to this house in West Point in 1927. Photo by the author

reer by turning himself over to the army. He was ordered to report to the nearest military post, Fort Crook, for disposition of his case. Apparently he was incarcerated only briefly, for he received a "blue" or "other than honorable" discharge on August 16, 1928. Mary Timmermann recalled helping secure his early release by pointing out that it made little sense for the army to keep her husband in the stockade while the county paid to take care of her and her children.¹¹

The Timmermanns' West Point home was on Oak Street in the southwest part of town. John Henry had a variety of jobs including farm laborer, WPA workman, and nightwatchman, but never seemed to have steady work as the family suffered through the long decade of the Great Depression. Another son, John Rudolph ("Rudy"), was born in 1930.

It was Mary Timmermann's determination that helped keep the family going as she assumed a major role as breadwinner. The four Timmermann children attended Guardian Angels School and on their way home, often stopped by the Goldenrod Cafe, where "Mrs. Timmy" worked. Mrs. Timmermann also took in washing and ironing and her daughter, Mary, recalled, "Mother usually got only three hours of sleep. I don't know how she did it, but that was the way she was for years and years."¹²

At school, Karl became interested in history, Latin, and military matters and soon became an expert on famous campaigns. He was an astute student of Julius Caesar's campaigns. Caesar built a forty-foot-wide bridge across the Rhine River just a few miles upstream from Remagen exactly two thousand years before the Ludendorff Bridge fell to American troops. One of Timmermann's schoolmates recalled being amazed at Karl's understanding of the military strategies of Alexander the Great and Caesar.¹³

Karl's interest in the military led him to hitchhike to Omaha in the summer between his junior and senior years to



John Henry Timmermann in his World War I uniform. Courtesy of Mary Timmermann Roberts Ellis and Carol Keller

Mary Weisbecker Timmermann with sons Karl (right) and Fritz. Courtesy of Carol Keller



join the Citizens' Military Training Corps. About the time he was beginning his senior year in school at West Point, war broke out in Europe in 1939.

The Timmermann children, as well as the parents, experienced resentment or discrimination from some West Point residents on account of John Henry's expedient desertion from duty in occupied Germany in 1919. Young Karl may have been exposed to taunts about his father's "cowardice" or the family's impoverished circumstances. His sister recalled that Karl's desire to serve his country came from a feeling that "my dad disgraced the Timmermann name, but I'm going to make it right again."¹⁴

According to Fritz Timmermann's wife, "It was very important to all four of the Timmermann kids that they could redeem their name."¹⁵ Eventually all four Timmermann children joined the U.S. Army, along with Mary's husband.

Karl Timmermann enlisted in Omaha on July 6, 1940, and was stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. He completed infantry officer candidate school and was commissioned second lieutenant at Fort Benning, Georgia, on February 16, 1943, then sent to Fort Riley, Kansas. In the summer of 1943 he returned home on furlough.¹⁶

While in West Point, he became ac-

quainted with LaVera Meyer, whom he saw every day of his short furlough. The couple parted, knowing that something special was happening, and Karl soon proposed via a letter, and enclosed a ring. On May 25, 1944, the couple was married in Omaha.¹⁷

Timmermann's unit embarked August 20, 1944, for the European Theater on board the *Queen Mary*. The ship docked in Scotland on August 27, a cold and clammy day that moved Karl to "put on my wool underwear . . . to keep my legs warm."¹⁸ On September 14, he wrote, "Dear Ma, I haven't received any mail from you in a long time. . . . I don't know where Fritz is, nor have

Karl Timmermann

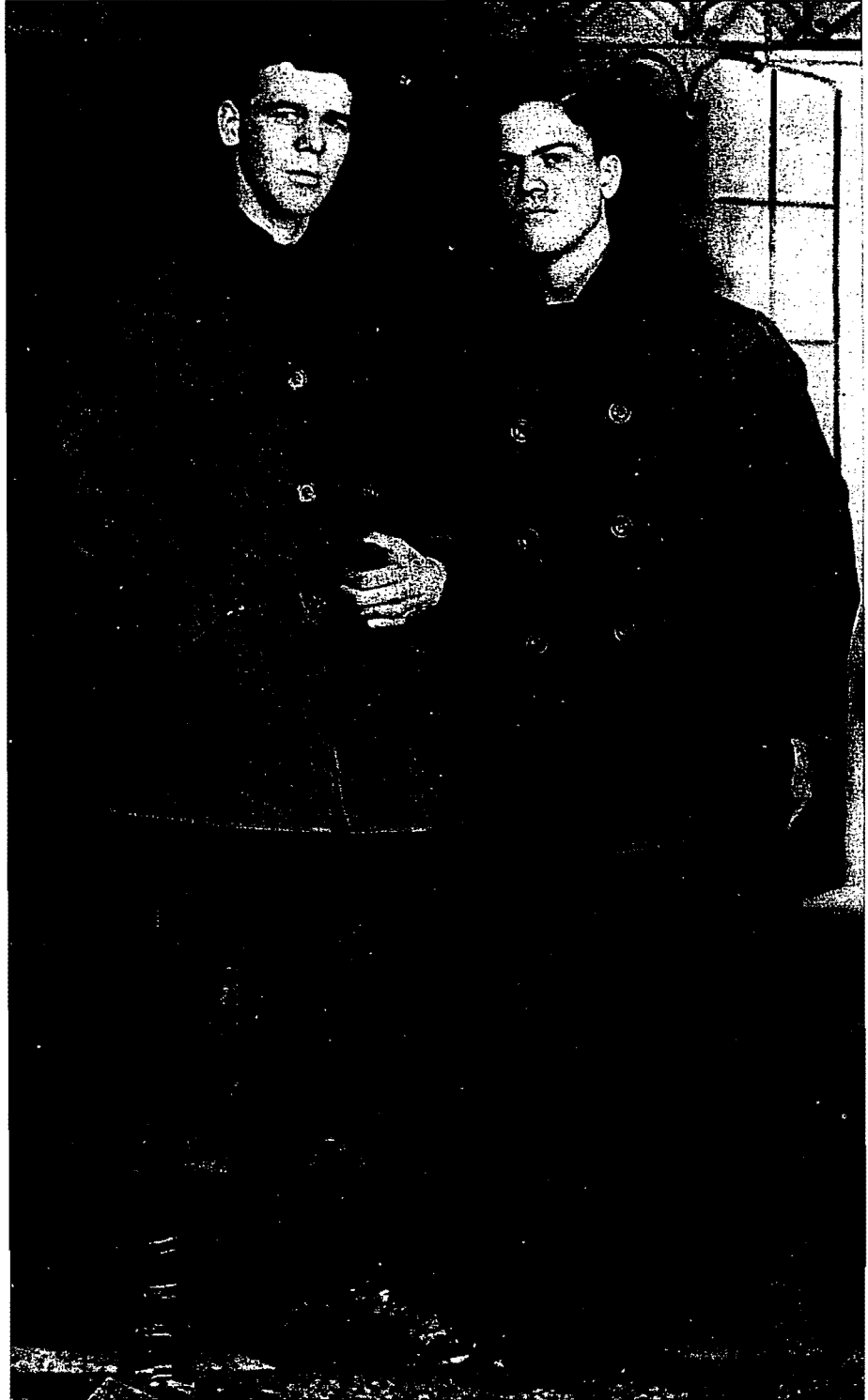
I heard from him. Has he been writing to you?"¹⁹

On September 28 the Ninth Armored Division embarked for the Continent. When the division arrived in France, Karl penned a letter to his mother, reporting he had heard from Fritz, who was in Belgium.²⁰ After putting up with miserable weather throughout the next month, the green soldiers finally were sent to the front lines in Luxembourg in early November. In December, Karl was briefly reunited with Fritz, who was serving in an engineer battalion.

Although Allied armies were poised to attack the German heartland, no spectacular breakthroughs had been made. The Ninth Armored Division was sent to the relatively quiet Ardennes sector in Belgium, where the American lines were thinly held. The interlude was about to end, however, both for Timmermann and for his comrades. On December 16 Hitler launched his desperate Ardennes offensive, which became known as the Battle of the Bulge. Timmermann's company, part of the Ninth Armored's Combat Command B under Brig. Gen. William M. Hoge, was in the thick of the fighting around St. Vith. The company's entire kitchen crew and its supply sergeant were captured and later executed during the infamous Malmedy Massacre.²¹

Timmermann was wounded in the arm by shell fragments for which he received the Purple Heart. For an untested outfit, the Ninth Armored Division had fought skillfully, giving ground with great reluctance and absorbing a lot of punishment. The Germans twice announced the division's destruction, prompting its members to call themselves, the "Phantom" Division.²²

After the German offensive had been turned back, Allied armies resumed their drive toward the Rhine. In late February 1945, the Ninth Armored Division was assigned to support infantry divisions protecting the right flank of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's pending drive across the Rhine into northern Germany.



Lt. Karl Timmermann (left) and his brother, Pvt. Fritz Timmermann, in Belgium, December 12, 1944. Courtesy of Mary Ann Hollman Timmermann

On February 28, unbeknownst to Karl, LaVera Timmermann gave birth to their daughter, Gay Diane. The same day Timmermann's company again found itself heavily involved in the fighting. On March 6, the company commander was wounded and Karl was appointed to take charge of Company A.²³

Almost before he could grasp his new responsibilities, Karl was summoned by task force commander Lt. Col. Leonard Engeman, who informed him that Company A was to be the advance guard for a combined armor and infantry drive to penetrate to the town of Remagen, located about ten miles away on the banks of the Rhine. The mission began early on the morning of March 7 and just before noon, the column had come in sight of the Rhine.

Alerted by the reaction of two of his soldiers, Timmermann "emerged from the woods and found himself confronted by a breathtaking view. Far below, the river wound through its narrow valley and off to his right, clearly outlined against the sky, was the prize no man dared hope for—the Ludendorff Bridge, still intact, spanning the Rhine."²⁴

Once General Hoge had been apprised of the situation, he issued orders to seize the bridge before the retreating Germans could blow it up. Timmermann's company and two others were already in Remagen and moving quickly toward the bridge. By 3 P.M., the Americans had secured the bridge's western approach, though the Germans had already set off charges that blew a thirty-foot-wide crater in the road.

Although the Americans could see German soldiers at the far end of the bridge and assumed that the bridge might blow up in their faces, General Hoge, through infantry battalion commander Maj. Murray Deevers, ordered Timmermann's company to fight its way across. Timmermann realized that he might be leading his men on a suicidal mission, but he quickly gave the order to advance. At that moment, the bridge shuddered from a tremendous explo-

50th Anniversary
Ludendorff Bridge
Remagen, Germany

7 March 1945 - 1995



"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."
Shakespeare

A postcard commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the crossing of the Rhine at Remagen. Courtesy of the author

sion, seemed to lift in the air, and settled back on its supports.

Incredulous to see the bridge still standing, Timmermann's men nevertheless obeyed his orders and began the dangerous sprint over the 1,069-foot structure, followed by engineers who frantically began cutting wires on the German demolition charges. After silencing German machine guns, the men of Company A completed the crossing and began flushing the defenders out of the railroad tunnel at the east end of the bridge. Sgt. Alex Drabik was the first American soldier to set foot on the east bank of the Rhine, and Lt. Karl Timmermann was the first American officer across. By 5:30 P.M. Company A had routed or captured the German defenders and the bridgehead was relatively secure. Faced with the unexpected prize of an intact bridge over the Rhine, General Eisenhower authorized a major effort to secure and expand the bridgehead.

When the fatally weakened bridge finally collapsed into the Rhine on March 17, American forces had established a

foothold from which they could not be dislodged. By this time pontoon and treadway bridges had been completed on either side of the old railroad bridge. Although the Rhine would eventually have been crossed regardless, the capture of the bridge at Remagen undoubtedly saved thousands of lives and shortened the war in Europe.

After remaining on the line a couple of days longer, Timmermann received a furlough. Rumors that he was a father were confirmed by a *Stars and Stripes* article he saw when he reached Paris.²⁵ By this time his exploits and those of his men had received worldwide publicity.

Like other soldiers thrust unexpectedly into the limelight, Timmermann was somewhat bewildered by all the attention. It was coincidence that had placed him in a position to be the first American officer across the Rhine, though his performance was exemplary and had a major effect on the outcome of the war. Being a patriot Timmermann probably felt he had responded as any good soldier would have under the circumstances.

Karl Timmermann

Yet Lieutenant Timmermann's crossing of the Rhine was rich with ironies he probably did not fully realize at the time. What other American officer had a father who may have crossed that same bridge as an American soldier in World War I, a father who had deserted his duty, but who had reared three sons and a daughter dedicated to exonerating the family name? What other American officer had been born a German citizen only a few miles from the Remagen Bridge and who risked encountering his German relatives among the bridge's defenders?

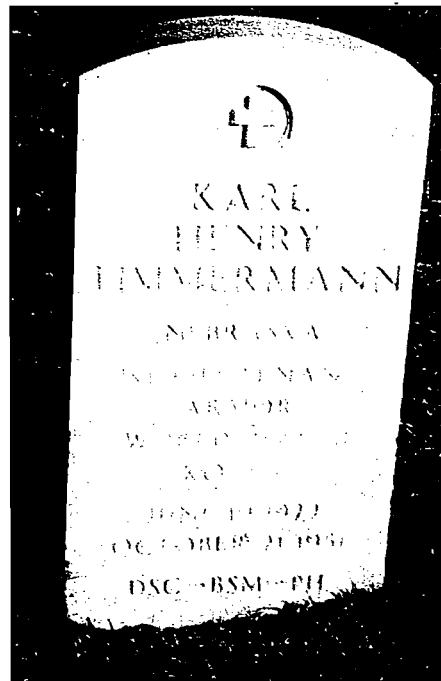
As a young, untested company commander, Karl Timmermann had nonetheless earned the respect of his men, who responded when he ordered them forward on what appeared to be a suicidal mission. Regardless of the unique coincidences that brought Lieutenant Timmermann to the banks of the Rhine on March 7, 1945, he proved himself dramatically suited to the task at hand.

The reports of "one of the war's most electrifying feats" soon filled the front pages of Allied newspapers around the world, and were recalled in the halls of Congress. Nebraska Congressman Karl Stefan of Norfolk proclaimed to the House of Representatives, "The lieutenant leading the first company of men across the river was Lt. Karl Timmermann of West Point, Nebraska. . . I know my colleagues are as thrilled as I was over the announcement. Lt. Timmermann and his company of American heroes represent those fine American GIs who were so frequently described by Ernie Pyle."²⁶

The *Omaha World-Herald* editorialized that "the young lieutenant from West Point, Nebraska, pulled off a bridge finesse that will go down in history. Lt. Timmermann led with the only card he had, raw courage." Continuing, the editor remarked upon the "return of the native" in recalling Timmermann's birth on German soil not far from the bridge at Remagen. "He learned in American schools to appreciate democracy and to despise tyranny. He might

reasonably comment that his feat was merely a slight repayment for the free air of liberty that he and millions of his kind had found in a tolerant United States."²⁷

Boyd Von Seggern, editor of the hometown *West Point Republican*, rendered perhaps the most poignant tribute



Timmermann's grave in the National Cemetery at Fort Logan, Colorado. Courtesy of Doug Moench

in a letter to Gay Diane Timmermann that appeared in the paper when Karl came home from the war in the fall of 1945:

Dear Little Miss:

This week was a very happy one in your very young life—Your Daddy came home from across the seas to see you and your Mommy and all of the folks he holds so dear. You, being only eight months old, are too young to realize that your Daddy is a national hero, but some day you will look at him and say, "Thanks, Daddy, for helping to keep America strong and free." . . . If your Daddy is a hero, we must add that there are some heroines in your family. Your grandmother who knew the anguish of having two sons fighting against her family in Frankfurt; your mother who

lived with you, alone, waiting out the days.

It is a grateful town and country that says to you, Baby Gay Diane: "Karl Timmermann pressed to the mark. He finished his course. He kept the faith. We thank him."²⁸

Timmermann was discharged from the army December 12, 1945. After a short stint as a salesman in Fremont, he reenlisted as a technical sergeant in the Regular Army on October 28, 1947, and was assigned to recruiting duty before becoming an instructor with the officers' reserve corps. He was commissioned an officer on December 26, 1948, sent to Fort Omaha in January 1949, and attached to the Seventh Mechanized Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop of the Seventh Infantry Division.²⁹

During the Korean War Timmermann participated with his division in the Inchon Landing in September 1950 and the subsequent fighting for the Suwon Airfield. A nagging pain he had been suffering since before the landing led him to consult the doctors at the 8054th Evacuation Hospital, where he was diagnosed with a tumor.³⁰ Transferred to Fitzsimmons Hospital in Denver for an operation and treatment, Karl Timmermann died October 21, 1951, at age twenty-nine. The final act in his military career was his burial at Fort Logan, Colorado, where his father's less illustrious military service began more than three decades earlier.

A Denver newspaperman captured the tragedy of Timmermann's death, noting that "the cancer called war had failed to take his life in two tries." Yet Timmermann's final battle was reflective of his military career. LaVera Timmermann recalled,

He detested cancer because of the fact that it was killing him and depriving him of a soldierly duty. . . . He made me promise to polish up his silver stripe, his buttons and his medals for the burial. He wanted every battle ribbon in proper place on his chest. He wanted to be as soldierly as possible."³¹

Karl Timmermann's Nebraska hometowns, Snyder and West Point, acknowl-

edged and celebrated his accomplishments with ceremonies on March 7, 1995. West Point concluded the Jubilee Celebration on June 18 when his sister Mary, his siblings' families, and Remagen historian Ken Hechler were scheduled to pay tribute to the "Hero of the Rhine."³²

Motivated by duty, honor, and patriotism, Karl Henry Timmermann accepted responsibility to redeem the family's name. When confronted with the opportunity at the Remagen Bridge on March 7, 1945, he proved more than equal to the challenge.

Notes

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Eisenhower's Own Story of the War* (New York: Arco Publishing Company, 1946), 91.

² *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 7, 1985, 39.

³ Ken Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen: The Amazing Story of March 7, 1945, The Day the Rhine River was Crossed* (Missoula, Mont.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1993 rev. ed.), 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ Henry Timmermann, Jr., "Our Life Story" (1920), copy in possession of the author.

⁶ *Cuming County Democrat* (West Point), Oct. 6, 1955, 7.

⁷ Deed Record 19: 402, Dodge County Register of Deeds, Fremont, Nebr.; 1910 U.S. Census, Thompson Precinct, Pierce County, Nebr. (microfilm at Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln).

⁸ *Cuming County Democrat*, June 6, 1917, 4; Ken Hechler to author, Apr. 10, 1995.

⁹ Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 25.

¹⁰ Interview of Ruth Schneider Beck, Oakland, Nebr., by author, Feb. 9, 1995.

¹¹ Ken Hechler to Gerhard and Bob Wostoupal, Apr. 10, 1995, enclosing copy of John Henry Timmermann discharge, copies in possession of the author.

¹² Interview of Mary Timmermann Roberts Ellis, Omaha, Nebr., by author, Feb. 5, 1995.

¹³ Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 53.

¹⁴ Ellis interview.

¹⁵ Telephone interview of Mary Ann Hollman Timmermann, Leavenworth, Kans., by author, Feb. 1995.

¹⁶ Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 26; *West Point Republican*, Oct. 25, 1951, 1.

¹⁷ Telephone interview of LaVera Meyer Timmermann Hansen, Mesa, Arizona, by author, Feb. 11, 18, 1995.

¹⁸ Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 4-6.

¹⁹ Karl Timmermann to Mary Weisbecker Timmermann, Sept. 14, 1944. Letter in possession of Mary Timmermann Roberts Ellis.

²⁰ Karl Timmermann to Mary Weisbecker Timmermann, Oct. 14, 1944. Letter in possession of Mary Timmermann Roberts Ellis.

²¹ Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ The account of the capture of the Ludendorff Bridge is drawn primarily from Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 79-168 passim.

²⁵ *Stars and Stripes* (Paris ed.), Mar. 11, 1945, 5.

²⁶ Hechler, *The Bridge at Remagen*, 2, 188-89; Rep. Karl Stefan, remarks to the House of Representatives, Mar. 9, 1945.

²⁷ *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 10, 1945, 4.

²⁸ *West Point Republican*, Oct. 25, 1945, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 25, 1951, 1.

³⁰ Karl Timmermann to Mary Weisbecker Timmermann, Sept. 14, 1950. Letter in possession of Mary Timmermann Roberts Ellis.

³¹ *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), Oct. 25, 1951.

³² Nebraska Governor E. Benjamin Nelson proclaimed Mar. 7, 1995, as "Karl Timmermann Day" in Nebraska. Portions of this article were excerpted from a series on Timmermann and his family published in the *Dodge* (Nebraska) *Criterion*, Jan. 19 - Mar. 23, 1995.



Timmermann Memorial Field in West Point was dedicated May 30, 1965. Seated are LaVera Meyer Timmermann Hansen (left), Gay Timmermann Estey, and Frank Estey. Behind them are Fritz and Mary Ann Timmermann, their children, and Remagen historian Ken Hechler. David and Mary Timmermann Roberts and family are seated behind the lectern at right.



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Photos: Lt Karl H Timmermann; Arnold Timmermann; Timmermann family home in West Point in 1927; John Henry Timmermann in his WWI uniform; Mary Weisbecker Timmermann with sons Karl and Fritz; Lt Karl Zimmerman and his brother Pvt Fritz Timmermann in Belgium, 1944; post card commemorating the fiftieth crossing of the Rhine at Remagen, the Ludendorff Bridge; Karl Henry Timmermann's grave at the National Cemetery at Fort Logan, Colorado; Timmermann Memorial Field in West Point dedication May 30, 1965